Episode Book

EPISODE #5660

The Siesta Law Nobody Obeys

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SYNOPSIS

Israel has rest hours written into law — 2 to 4 PM, noise restricted, on the books since 1961 — and almost nobody observes them. Where did the siesta actually come from (not Spain, it turns out), why has Spain itself largely given it up, and which countries are building nap infrastructure today? From Charlemagne's three-hour midday rest to China's office nap beds to Japan's lavender-scented nap rooms, this episode traces how the afternoon nap moved, mutated, and survived — just not where you'd expect.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a particular feeling you get when you find out a law exists that nobody has ever actually obeyed. Like discovering a statute that says all horses must be walked backwards on Tuesdays.



Herman

Or that Israel has a legally mandated siesta.



Corn

Right. Daniel wrote in about this. He's been sitting with the fact that Israel has a siesta law on the books, in the shape of noise restrictions, and it is essentially unenforced. He calls it paradoxical given how frenetic the country is, and also kind of ideal. He'd like Israel to be more Mediterranean in tempo. And then he asked a whole set of questions. Where did the siesta actually originate? Which countries take it most seriously today? What does it look like in practice on the Iberian Peninsula, with the small stores and the split hours posted on the door? And then the real question underneath it all: is there any culture where the siesta has actually survived and been integrated into a normal office workday, because he can't see how it works when you can't commute home twice a day and there are no nap facilities on site.



Herman

That last one is the good one.



Corn

It is. So let's start at the beginning, because the siesta is not actually Spanish.



Herman

It is not. And that's the first thing to get out of the way. The word comes from the Latin hora sexta, the sixth hour counting from dawn, so roughly noon. The Romans stopped to eat and rest at that hour because the midday heat along the Mediterranean was punishing. The Latin word for the practice itself was meridiato, from meridies, midday, and that one survives in the French meridienne. The Spanish just kept the number.



Corn

So the sixth hour became the sixth hour nap, and then the sixth hour nap became a Spanish stereotype it never asked for.



Herman

It shows up in Catullus, in Caesar, in Cicero, in Suetonius. Sidonius in the fifth century describes Theodoric the Second taking his siesta after dinner as always slight and sometimes intermitted. And Einhard's Life of Charlemagne has the emperor in summer, after his midday meal, removing his shoes, undressing completely, and resting for two or three hours.



Corn

Two or three hours. That's not a siesta, that's a second night.



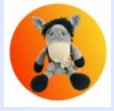
Herman

Charlemagne had the luxury of being Charlemagne.



Corn

Most people don't.



Herman

And that's actually the pivot into Spain, because the Spanish version was not primarily about heat. Post-Civil War Spain had a lot of people working two jobs, one in the morning, one in the late afternoon, with a two-hour gap in between to rest or to travel from the first job to the second. The siesta got baked into the structure of the workday. It wasn't a luxury, it was the only seam in the day where a person with two jobs could sit down.



Corn

So the heat was the original reason and the two-job commute was the reason it stuck.



Herman

And then there's the Franco time zone thing on top of it. Franco moved Spain's clocks forward an hour to line up with Nazi Germany during the war, and sleep researchers argue that pushed Spanish schedules out of sync with the actual sun. So you end up with a country where the sun is at its highest at what the clock calls two in the afternoon, and dinner is at ten at night, and nobody sleeps enough.



Corn

A country running on the wrong time zone for eighty years because of a wartime alignment with a regime that lost.



Herman

That's the shape of it.



Corn

So where does it actually stand now? Because Daniel's picture of the Iberian Peninsula is the small store with the split hours on the door, and I suspect that picture is more accurate for a small town in 1995 than for Madrid right now.



Herman

It's fading fast. A 2009 survey found only sixteen point two percent of Spaniards napped daily. Twenty-two percent sometimes. Three point two percent weekends only. And fifty-eight point six percent never. The daily-nap share had fallen seven points since 1998.



Corn

Nearly sixty percent never. In the country that invented the word for it in the popular imagination.



Herman

The BBC cites a similar number. Almost sixty percent never, about eighteen percent sometimes. Spaniards themselves now treat the siesta as an outdated cliché, something foreigners expect them to do. The Guardian ran a piece in 2023 basically asking why Spain has given up on the nap, and the answer is that the nap was never the point. The two-job workday was the point, and the two-job workday is gone.



Corn

And the hours data cuts against the lazy Mediterranean stereotype anyway, doesn't it? Spanish workers clock more hours per year than British workers and a lot more than German ones.



Herman

Sixteen ninety-one versus sixteen seventy-four versus thirteen seventy-one, per the OECD. Spain is not a country of lounging. It's a country of long hours and late nights and not enough sleep, which is a completely different thing.



Herman

There's a term for it in the Spanish context, presentismo. Spending hours longer than you need to at work in order to look serious and committed. Marc Grau at the Harvard Kennedy School describes it as affecting motivation, job performance, work satisfaction, life satisfaction, and obviously family life. That's the actual Spanish disease. The siesta is the costume it wears abroad.



Corn

So the practice is dying, but the small-store version Daniel described is still real in places. The split hours on the door, the communal rhythm.



Herman

It's real in smaller towns and in shops. In cities and offices it's mostly gone. And there's one place that tried to hold the line by law. Ador, a small town near Valencia, in 2015 enshrined the right to the afternoon nap in law. Everything closes from two to five in the afternoon and noise is minimized.



Corn

A town passing a law to protect a nap that the rest of the country is quietly abandoning.



Herman

A deliberate preservation attempt against a national trend. Which is a nice bridge to the second half of Daniel's question, because Israel is the same move but stranger.



Corn

Israel is the same move but stranger. Israel's noise regime sits under the Abatement of Nuisances Law of 1961, plus regulations from 1992, amended in 2001. The law bars any considerable or unreasonable noise if it disturbs or is likely to disturb a person in the vicinity. And then there are specific rest hours. Two in the afternoon to four, and eleven at night to seven in the morning.



Herman

And local authorities are obligated to enforce it. But in practice.



Corn

Green Prophet called the two-to-four window natural quiet hours, when European Jews like to nap, and it's called schlafstunde, Yiddish for afternoon sleep. And then the same piece says the law is still intact but it's easy to get around it if you own a construction business and need to get the job done.



Herman

There's a plaque in Givatayim from 2012 about afternoon siesta between two and four. So it's not just a rumor. It's on signs.



Corn

It's on signs and it's in the statute and it is not happening. The Jerusalem Post ran an opinion piece in 2016 headlined Quiet time? Forget about it, with the subhead that quiet time between two and four in the afternoon is an idea whose time has passed.



Herman

And there's a 2024 State Comptroller report on noise nuisances in urban space that found noise pollution a significant and widespread nuisance, with the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the police, and local authorities all responsible for addressing it. Which is a polite way of saying nobody is.



Corn

So Israel has a law that preserves the shape of a siesta without the siesta. A legal fossil. The tempo of a Mediterranean afternoon, written into the books, in a country that runs at the tempo of a startup pitch.



Herman

That's the paradox Daniel is pointing at. The law is older than the practice ever was in this country. It came in with a wave of European Jewish immigrants who brought the schlafstunde with them, and the statute outlived the habit.



Corn

Which is a strange thing to think about. A law can be a memory. It can hold the shape of something a community used to do, long after the community stopped doing it.



Herman

And it can be ignored in a way that's almost affectionate. Nobody is campaigning to repeal it. It just sits there, and construction crews work through it, and everyone knows.



Corn

So the old model fails. You can't commute home twice a day, and most offices have nowhere to lie down. But that doesn't mean the nap is dead. It just moved.



Herman

It moved east. China is the standout case. Chinese companies have dedicated hours during which the office lights are dimmed, fold-out beds are rolled out, and lunches are slept off. Some offices have installed temporary or permanent sleeping and washing



Herman (continued)

facilities to encourage employees to stay round the clock.



Corn

Washing facilities. For the round-the-clock part. That's not a nap, that's a dormitory with a deadline.



Herman

The word is wushui, noon sleep. About two-thirds of the Chinese population habitually takes an afternoon nap, averaging around thirty minutes. A 2021 survey found sixty-seven point three eight percent nap regularly. And it's grown with rising incomes and longer working hours, which is the opposite of what you'd expect. You'd think prosperity buys you the ability to skip the nap. In China it bought the infrastructure for it.



Corn

And there's a whole economy around it now. People paying for midday rest.



Herman

A legal counsel in Dalian, Lin Yihan, forty-three years old, pays a hundred yuan, roughly eighteen dollars and seventy cents, to recline in a massage shop for sixty minutes during her lunch hour. That's the lunch-break economy. You rent the nap.



Corn

That's the sentence.



Herman

And then Japan, which is the more interesting case because the push there is explicitly framed as a response to death.



Corn

Karoshi.



Herman

Karoshi. Death from overwork. A 2013 NHK reporter died after a hundred and fifty-nine hours of overtime. Dentsu was fined in 2017 after a twenty-four-year-old employee's suicide. A 2019 law capped overtime at forty-five hours a month and three hundred and sixty hours a year. And Japan has the shortest average sleep in the world, four hundred and forty-two minutes a day per the OECD, about seven point three hours, versus four seventy-one in South Korea and five hundred plus in a lot of countries.



Corn

So the country that sleeps the least is the one building nap rooms.



Herman

GMO Internet Group's Tokyo headquarters fills an unused conference room with lavender scent and twenty-seven beds, available daily from twelve thirty for an hour. They branded it GMO Siesta.



Corn

They named it after the thing Spain is giving up.



Herman

And their spokesperson, Sae Takahashi, draws a distinction that matters. She says what we encourage here is not inemuri. With hirune, one is consciously making an effort to rest within a short space of time.



Corn

Inemuri being the older Japanese practice.



Herman

Inemuri is being present while sleeping. Napping in public, at meetings, on the train. And it's read culturally as a sign of diligence, of exhaustion in the service of work, rather than laziness. Which is the exact opposite of the Western read. If you fall asleep in a meeting in New York you're fired. In Tokyo you're a martyr.



Corn

So Japan has two naps. The one you're not supposed to notice, and the new one you're supposed to schedule.



Herman

And the scheduled one is the one with the lavender.



Corn

Of course it is.



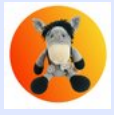
Herman

There's a Stanford sleep researcher, Seiji Nishino, who visited an office block near Tokyo Station and found no sleeping signs in the toilet cubicles. His line was that instead of spending money making those signs, it would make sense to invest in nap rooms.



Corn

A sign telling people not to sleep in the toilet is a sign that people are sleeping in the toilet.



Herman

That's the whole argument, yes.



Corn

So the inversion Daniel is circling is real. Spain is abandoning the nap. China and Japan, the two countries most famous for brutal work cultures, are institutionalizing it. Same behavior, three completely different justifications. Spain was heat and two-job commutes. China is the lunch-break economy and rising incomes. Japan is karoshi prevention and sleep debt.



Herman

And the Spain of it is not entirely dead either. Hotels dot com trialled sleep pods in Madrid's Atocha station in early 2017 under the slogan save our siesta. There was an app in 2014, SiestAPP, that helps you time your naps. And Juan Jose Ortega from the Spanish Society of Sleep has a line I keep coming back to. If employees can have a coffee or a smoke, then why not a nap?



Corn

Which is the whole question in one sentence. We've decided that two stimulant breaks a day are normal and a rest break is decadent.



Herman

There's a health argument that's been sitting there since 2007. A study by Naska and colleagues in the Archives of Internal Medicine associated the siesta with a thirty-seven percent reduction in coronary mortality.



Corn

Thirty-seven percent. That's not a small effect. If a drug did that you'd put it in the water.



Herman

You'd put it in the water. And yet the stigma of sleeping on the job is stronger than the evidence for it. Which is where I think Daniel's office question actually lands. The barrier isn't biology. It's status. A nap reads as a confession that you're not needed for that hour.



Corn

A coffee break reads as fuel. A nap reads as absence.



Herman

The coffee break is a performance of readiness. The nap is an admission of limits.



Corn

The countries that have integrated it are the ones where the limits got so bad they became a public health crisis.



Hilbert

The word you keep using is siesta.



Corn

That's the word.



Hilbert

That's not what it was called. Not where I saw it done.



Herman

What was it called?



Hilbert

It wasn't called anything. That's the point. There was no word for it because nobody had decided it was a thing yet. It was just what happened after lunch.



Corn

Where did you see it?



Hilbert

My mother's building. Third floor, two rooms, the back one faced the courtyard. Every day at two the whole courtyard went quiet. Not because of a law. Because everyone had the same idea at the same time.



Herman

What did people actually do?



Hilbert

Sat. Some of them slept. Most of them just sat with the radio off. The woman two doors down, Mrs. Peretz, she'd take her shoes off and put her feet on a crate. That was her whole routine. Shoes off, feet on the crate.



Corn

That's it?



Hilbert

Forty minutes. Then the shoes went back on.



Herman

You did this too?



Hilbert

I was eleven. I did what I was told.



Corn

It wasn't a siesta. It was just a pause.



Hilbert

It was a pause. And the thing about it was nobody had to be convinced. There was no campaign. No law. No lavender. The building just agreed.



Herman

And then it stopped.



Hilbert

It stopped when the air conditioning came in. Once you could be comfortable at two in the afternoon you didn't need the pause anymore. The heat was the whole reason and the heat went away.



Corn

The practice died with the problem it was solving.



Hilbert

That's what I've been sitting here thinking about. You've been talking about laws and offices and whether it can come back. It doesn't come back. It wasn't a tradition. It was a response. Take away the thing it was responding to and it goes.



Herman

The response was never the nap. It was the heat.



Hilbert

The nap was just what people did while they were waiting for the heat to pass.



Corn

Spain losing the siesta isn't a loss of culture. It's a loss of a problem.



Hilbert

That's the way I'd put it.



Corn

If Hilbert's right, the question isn't whether Spain can get the siesta back. It's whether there's a new problem that a nap solves.



Herman

There is. It's just not heat. It's sleep debt. Japan is not reinstating a tradition. It's responding to karoshi. The nap rooms aren't nostalgia, they're triage.



Corn

Which means the countries that institutionalize the nap will be the ones with the worst sleep problems, not the ones with the best climate.



Herman

That's the pattern. China's wushui grew with longer working hours. Japan's hirune grew out of a death-from-overwork crisis. Neither one is a Mediterranean idyll. They're both pressure valves.



Corn

And Israel?



Herman

Israel has the law but not the pressure. Or rather, it has a different pressure. The country runs hot, but not in a way that makes an afternoon pause feel necessary. It makes it feel indulgent.



Corn

The law sits there, a fossil of a problem that never fully arrived here.



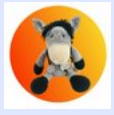
Herman

Which is the strangest version of the whole thing. Spain had the problem and lost the practice. Israel has the practice on paper and never had the problem. China and Japan have the problem and are inventing the practice.



Corn

Three countries, three ways of getting the same thing wrong.



Herman

The health data says all three of them are leaving something on the table. Thirty-seven percent reduction in coronary mortality. That's the number that should be on the door of every office in the world.



Corn

Instead we have no sleeping signs in the toilets.



Herman

We have no sleeping signs in the toilets.



Corn

The question for the future is whether the nap facilities spread, or whether the stigma holds. My guess is the stigma holds in countries where sleep is still treated as a personal failing rather than a structural one. The nap rooms will show up where the crisis is loud enough.



Herman

The law in Israel will stay on the books, unenforced, because nobody has a reason to repeal it and nobody has a reason to use it.



Corn

A quiet hour that nobody keeps, in a country that never learned to be quiet.



Herman

That's the fossil.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you enjoyed this, leave us a review, or find us at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.